DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 787 CS 202 646

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TITLE Consciousness and the Curriculum: An Idea for Change.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, Massachusetts, April 2-4, 1976); Occasional light print

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Educational Attitudes; *Educationally Disadvantaged; *Educational Philosophy; *English Curriculum; Middle Class Values; Personal Values; *Remedial Instruction; *Self Concept; Social Values

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that teachers of remedial students must make their students create their own order and meanings which may be at variance with the established order around them, but are valid nevertheless. Current research stresses the need to develop a positive self-concept, particularly in remedial students and in those whose cultural values are not the same as the middle class. Several research studies dealing with "disadvantaged" students are examined and suggestions are offered for teachers who want to stress each student's common humanity and unique sense of being in the English curriculum. (TS)

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CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE CURRICULUM: AN IDEA FOR CHANGE

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High reading scores and proficiency of technical English have become the natural, rightful, and only order of measuring student ability and with it, the chances for succeeding as an individual within the shcool system. And our schools have become so masterful in training students and their teachers to view the world as a place where only that one order exists that few have thought this order as merely a ficiton, invented. not "God given." And in so doing, the schools have failed to transmit the idea that there are many possibilities for human life other than the one of "official reality."

Believing that technical skills proficiency is the only order of things is of course detrimental to any student and any teacher. However, the average and honor student and his teacher can at least operate under such a system. The remedial student and his teacher, however, cannot, for under it each is condemned to failure in a system which screens out all other possibilities. Only one inexorable truth remains for this type student: I am substandard. (I recall a student in a remedial class who simply signed his name "Mr. Fale.")

A recent New York Times Magazine article, "It Was A Good School To Integrate," talks of the problems in a school in a white middle-class Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood. The school, formerly all white, now has 30% of its students coming from Bedford-Stuyvesant, with the skills deficiencies common to ghetto children. Integration, the article notes, has failed in the

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school: there are two separate schools, one black, one white, with teacher fear. Small wonder in a school where the Steve Kramers and their teachers are studying poetic imagery, calculus, and Carl Jung, knowing full well they are learning the tools by which to make it in the world. In contrast, the Ernest Washingtons and their teachers are in Power English and Power Social Studies and Business Arithmetic and Prealgebra. Ernest plods through vocabulary books, reviewing words like "vague" and "gesture" and is taught Pimp, Whoreson, My Daddy Was A Numbers Runner by a white middle class teacher who thinks that these books are the only relevancies to ghetto children's lives. In math, Ernest learns how to divide 8 into 48. His teachers, the article points out, are well meaning--some of the students are more than five years behind in reading skills, and the teachers try to improve these skills. But, whatever the nature of their motivation, a desperate situation is created by teachers who don't know how to deal with the situation, by students who have been condemned to second and third "classness." Control becomes the key in their educational process.

> "When materials and traditions do not match the child, and when the memories and intentions of the educatiors do not coincide or fit the memories and intentions of the students, power comes into play in the guise of manipulative activity."[1]

The teacher, coming from a completely different value system, is thus forced to maintain classes where he must constantly worry about control. The school systems of our cities are often a testament to that principle--we must control or be beaten. Dwayne Huebner's eloquent comment on such education is particularly moving:

> Oh yes, we are for the urban black, if he is not angry and will speak in moderate tones, accept our middle class behaviors and affirm our future, thus perhaps giving up his. Oh yes , we are for the

> American Indian if he will give up his past and accept our future and our last 45 years of public policy. Oh yes, we are for the homosexual, if he will stay in the closet and not let his peculiarities stain our image of the future. Oh yes we are for the women, if they will accept their female role in our male future.....We are for those individuals who will protect and maintain our image of the future, but what of their imagined future? If the tomorrow requires that we give up some of our privileges, will we still be for those individuals?[2]

Huebner, commenting on the political nature of our educative process, implies very little hope for the future of American education. That implication aside, in such worlds as those of our city schools, violence will never be very far from the surface.

I see these same ideas in a recent article in Today's Education, the official publication of the NEA. In "Today's Students Are Impossible" a teacher of twenty-five years speaks of having left the schools because she could not take the pressures of a divided school. I see these ideas in Nell Kedde's article "Classroom Knowledge." Ms. Kedde talks about the ideal pupil and the set of teacher expectations "which constitute a taken for granted notion of appropriate pupil behavior."[3] These preconceived notions are, of course, self-fulfilling prophecies. Ms. Kedde sees "the ability to grasp any concept referring to a pupil's willingness or ability to take over and accept the teacher's categories."[4] Obviously, if the teacher has one category, technical skills proficiency, the remedial student can never be accepted into it, and the teacher can never accept the student. A most distressing situation results. A horrendous assumption has made it all possible--an assumption that there is only one way to reach Heaven, or, for that matter, that there is only one Heaven.

It is my thesis that the teachers of remedial students must make that student aware that he too creates his own order and meanings which flavor the world--order and meanings which may be at variance with some established order around him, but as valid nevertheless. Of course, we all need schemata by which to interpret our lives; otherwise, our lives will nothing but chaos. But the student must have the "recognition of many possibilities as his possibility, of becoming his possibility."[5] In this process, the teacher is a stimulus for another being to take his interior journey, to ask himself questions in the responses to which will come the idea that there are many perspectives by which to view the world, that anything, or certainly more than he had thought, is possible for him.

I don't mean to suggest that writing and reading skills not be stressed; obviously the reality principle holds that these skills are necessary for even minimum functioning in our world. But we cannot, as a reading coordinator at a large vocational high school told me last week, "stress only skills--the Hell with the psyche; a healthy psyche will come when the skills come." What happens if the skills do not come? Why wait that long--until the student is alienated from and hostile to his whole world?

Current research stressesthe need to develop a positive self-concept, particularly in remedial students and in those whose cultural values are not the same as the middle class. In Alienation and Achievement Among Ogala Sioux Secondary School Students, Bernard Spilke observed education on an Indian reservation. He noted, first and foremost, alienation between students and their teachers.

> One way of viewing the teaching process sees the traditional teacher as active and powerful in the

> classroom and the student as passive, conforming, and powerless. The great potential for creating and maintaining alienation is present."[6]

In the encounter between the"disadvantaged student" with the middle class structure, Spilke notes a great clash with resultant alienation. He sees the alienation partially alleviated by students and teachers learning to appreciate the human problems that each confronts, with each coming to understand the hopes and goals of the other. He doesn't say how this is to achieved within the classroom, but he gives researched support to the humanistic notion that the teacher should reinforce common humanity with his students, to extend the feeling that "we are all in this together."

Other literature has extended these findings to youth in larger ghettoes. The ghetto student and the student with skills deficiencies are not, by their very natures, the same; however, the two often are found together. The problems the ghetto child deals with in encountering a white middle class teaching world have been told hundreds of times; I feel that these difficulties are made significantly greater if that middle class teacher honors academic excellence only. In any case, the need to develop a positive self-concept is well documented.

Daniel Levine examined attitudes of students at predominantly Black high schools in five U.S. cities, working largely with a 40-50 item questionnaire. Among the questions were the following:

1. People like me don't have a chance to be successful.

   agree very much , agree, not sure, disagree, dis-agree very much
2. Good luck is more important than hard work.
3. I would participate in a riot.
4. Why have some Blacks engaged in violence?
   gain equal rights, revenge, looting, ignorance
5. Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?
6. Why do you think your fellow students often do poorly in school?

lack of preparation, unreasonable requirements, lack of ability, lack of support at home, lack of study habits, teachers don't understand.

7. I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment as a result of the kind of person I am.

In analyzing the data, he found a most depressing situtation: polarization between black-white growing, with less expectancy that problems would be solved. Youth in larger cities tended to have very little contact with whites, tending to be more fatalistic and more alienated.

In two research projects, Anthony and Louise Soares compared 100 "advantaged" to 100 "disadvantaged" students. The data from a questionnaire of teacher and student ratings revealed the expected: the disadvantaged had high expectancy, low performance, with teachers seeing them rather negatively. Researchers dealing with self-concepts among high school students are consistent in noting a destructive self image which economically and academically poor youngsters face. Don't be fooled by the fancy titles of such papers**; the worlds each describes is hardly fancy. It is a world of stigmatized identity, a human day-by-day experience of degredation. Students, being human souls, resent that experience regardless of the rationalizations offered for its continuance, and the rationalization may be simply that skills, skills, and more skills are needed to enable them to function effectively in our world. But, as a result, our schools are full of defensive students, defensive teachers, both victims of a system which often deals with just assumptions, with a world of "taken-for-granted." In such a world, people continually attempt to resist, escape, or change their identity. To help such a situation, student (and teacher) education must focus on self-concept, on the

**Titles of articles I've read on this subject include "Correlates of Self Perceptions in School," "Academic Performance and Self Concept as a Function of Achievement Variability," "Ed. for Cultural Awareness", "Effect of Academic Failure on Self Concept", "Integrity Development as a Curriculum Basis."

many ways which an individual can perceive himself. All students, especially those who have been labelled slow, remedial, modified, must learn from their teachers that each one flavors his own world with his own reality.

To illustrate what can be done, I have only to turn to the world around us. I don't want to list a series of lesson plans here; I'm merely suggesting ways by which a teacher may realistically stress each student's common humanity and unique sense of being. It may come as a shock, with feeling of relief to many students. It can be done with an object as simple as an orange. The teacher could ask the class to describe an orange. Then, he might ask individuals to tell what the orange reminds him about and why. Each, of course, will be reminded of something different, of the uniqueness of his own memory, and in that difference lies a very sophisticated concept.

> "Man finds himself at any moment of his daily life in a biographically determined situation. The situation a man is in is the sedimentation of man's previous experiences, and as such, is his unique possession, given to him and to him alone."[7]

Essential in this view is the idea that the opinions we have, the orders we create, are not the stuff of dreams. Each person's life is very different from the other; as a result each interprets the world completely differently. Is one response more valid than the other? Obviously both are valid, and the truth contained in this does not depend on a reading score, on technical skills proficiency. And a very sophisticated concept can be realized by using a simple orange. The students have named their own worlds in the process.

The teacher could read the class the following monograph , excerpted from a Teachers College, Columbia University Anthropology exam:

> Mr. Smith has come in to teach an English lesson to the class of Spanish-speaking children. He says, smiling, "Let's try a brief introduction." and asks a girl to translate into Spanish. The sentences he gives them to repeat in English are: their name, age, school, and what they'd like to do--i.e. their interests. A girl says, "I live at 786 Amsterdam Avenue." She is made to say this six times because she keeps leaving out a syllable here and there. There is alot of side noise, and Mr. Smith says, "I told you to shut up." The next child is made to say the same routine. It seems all "want to learn English" as their interest. When he gets to this sentence, Mr.Smith asks him to translate it into Spanish, and then to translate the whole thing. He does. Meanwhile a boy is rocking his chair at the back of the room. A girl then tries to say the sentence series, and a boy is helping her at every step. While this is going on, a girl is rocking her chair in the back. Now another boy is going through the sequence. He is made to repeat "I go to P.S.168" five times because each time he says, "I going to P.S. 168." Finally he says, "I going to home," and tries to leave the room.

This monograph has limitless possibilities for discussion; I think of one centering on ideas that the schools too are fictions, that they do teach their own culture and in so doing can destroy human beings. It is important for students to realize this, not for the purpose of training young revolutionaries, but for helping students to know and name their worlds.

I am fearful of imposing an artificial thesis on any idea merely for the sake of something new or for making a neat little point in a neat little paper. However, as I search for ideas for a curriculum focusing on consciousness development for rededial students, I find many possibilities of challenges to a world most people take for granted. I see such possibilities in many recent popular movies: Claudine, who defies stereotyping, Alice , who tries to make it on her own, Erico in Love and Anarchy , a half-crazed man who strikes a blow for a sort of freedom, Lenny who creates a different kind of order, Serpico,whochooses not to accept the "official reality" that police officers should take bribes; all these people go through their own private Hells in being

true to some sense of self.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, "True philosophy consists of relearning to look at the world."[8] I am not so naive as to think that in a few classroom discussions, remedial students will suddenly begin to do their own philosophy and will overcome a lifetime of being condemned to second and third classness. But our schools, particularly our city public schools with vast numbers of students with "skills deficiencies", can help these students start questioning themselves, to have them realize that they do, in part, constitute their own reality. To find out what that reality is like, they must return to and examine their own "lifeworld: as opposed to the "real world" of official reality.

A teacher always should ask himself what he wants his students to take seriously and why. I don't want American education to produce a lot of alienated revolutionaries. Hopefully, I want modern education to stress an idea that just as much as the world of the students is a created and artificial one, the students can and should create their own worlds. They must do so; they must believe that they can do so in order to feel alive. The price of feebly submitting to the imposed order is a numbness and horror that destroys. We have seen the results of such submission.

How can we teach others that they should choose viable rather than meaningless or empty or heartbreaking orders? How can we teach, rather than indoctrinate, the idea that the lifestyle of a Lenny or of a Superfly is not a very viable order? And it is answers to this fundamental question which all teachers must keep exploring in order to bring more meaning to the education of all city students.

> "There must be an unveiling and a gradual disclosure of inner and outer horizons if learners are to be enabled to conceive of such projects and take action to carry them out."[9]

The very real excitement of this kind of approach in the classroom is that it does concentrate on such revelations, on the "I", not on remediation. We must constantly engage students

> "to make possible a discovery of self, to restore spontaneity, to help students rediscover their actual presence to themselves, which in the last resort is what the concept of consciousness means."[10]

And this approach is possible, no matter what the reading level. It does not supplantskills remediation; obviously education must equip students with the means by which to transform their worlds and to operate in them. However, we must arouse all city children to reflective consciousness, to arouse them to new possibilities, to act on their freedom, to change the alienation, the horror, the hopelessness that so many take for granted. It is the way for remedial students and their teachers to remain alive in a system which constantly threatens to numb.

Footnotes

1. Dwayne Huebner, "Toward A Remaking of Curricular Language," in Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theoryed. William Pinar (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1974), p. 43.

2. Dwayne Huebner, "Poetry and Power: The Politics of Curricular Development," (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University), (mimeographed), p. 4.

3. Nell Keddie, "Classroom Knowledge," in Knowledge and Control ed. Michael Young (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1971), p. 145.

4. Ibid., p. 146.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965; first paperbound edition, March 1968), p. 35.

6. Spilka, Bernard, Alienation and Achievement Among Oglala Sioux Secondary Students, Final Report, (ERIC # ED 045 225, August 1970), p. 415.

7. Alfred Schutz, On Phenomenology and Social Relations, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p.73.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty, ed. Alden L. Fisher, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1969), p. 42.

9. Maxine Greene, "Cognition, Consciousness, Curriculum," in Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory ed. William Pinar (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1974), p. 79.

10. Maxine Greene, "Literature, Existentialism, and Education," in Existentialism and Phenomenology in Education ed. David E. Denton,(New York: Teachers College Press, 1974), p. 79.

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